

From Neos Kosmos *The Weekend Edition* 23 March 2019.

Words by Mary Sinanidis for Neos Kosmos. Modified for reproduction for the KAV.

As a young Australian born Greek-Irish boy raised in Sydney, Geoffrey Conaghan was fascinated by tales of his great grandmother Amirisa (Hatziagapitou) Askitis.

Images of black-clad yiayias in Australia were far removed from the suitcases filled with her multi-coloured belongings - remnants of another life on the remote island of Kastellorizo in the eastern Mediterranean.

Through the exotic silks, impeccable satins, fine crepe and plush cottons he saw and felt the island's history - with geopolitics becoming a tangible affair, intricately woven between the layers and spoken by the detailed embroidery.

It is this fascination he'll share in his talk, titled *Origins of the Kastellorizian Costume* at the KAV clubrooms on Sunday April 14 2019.

'These are not just clothes, but pieces of history' Mr Conaghan told Neos Kosmos, in reference to his family heirlooms numbering over 80 items.

'When I first saw them I marvelled at the intricacy of the designs and the exotic colours that were in stark contrast to the conservative look that my great grandmother adopted in Australia as she tried to blend in when she arrived as a 50-year-old migrant in 1925.'

TEXTILES AND TRADE ROUTES

Clearly, the interest in the textiles was more than about the pieces as fashion statements, nor was it purely fascination with the complexity of designs.

'The textiles used in the wardrobe reflect trade routes and include Indian ikats, south Asian batik and silk, French and Italian silk brocades and European and Turkish velvets' he said.

Trade has always interested Mr Conaghan, a former Victorian Agent-General to London.

As a man who spent a large portion of his career promoting trade and investment opportunities in Australia to overseas markets he saw the relationship between trade-routes and his pro-Yiayia's clothes.

Yiayia Amirisa was born on Kastellorizo in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, when it was a major safe harbour between east and west Mediterranean- Venice, Marseilles, Genoa and Rodos to the west and Cyprus, Syria, Beirut and Antioch to the east.

The tiny island was important because of its location and harbour and Kastellorizo's population and economy reached its epoch with an estimated 10,000 people. A stark difference to the 492 people counted in the 2011 census.

During the island's heyday, many of the men were involved in commerce, sailing ships that exchanged goods between east and west. While the men travelled, women enjoyed the spoils of the island's commerce, ran the households and were often involved in family businesses. The spoils were wearing the finest fabrics that combined the fashions of the east and west.

'After 400 years of Ottoman rule, Kastellorizo was a French protectorate, then came under Italian rule. There was trade with the Middle East and therefore trade links with China, Indonesia, India - many influences of these links are seen through the garments' Mr Conaghan said. 'clearly, Kastellorizo was the place to be'.

IT WAS A WOMAN'S WORLD

Women enjoyed a privileged lifestyle. They managed business and property as the men were at sea. Wealth was passed from mother-to-daughter until local customs were replaced by reformed Greek property laws in the 1980s.

Single women would build their dowries that also included fashionable items introduced by the trade contacts established by their merchant menfolk. Much of the jewellery was sourced in Nicosia, where some of the best craftsmen of the Ottoman Empire were located.

'This wardrobe has survived intact for four generations. It went to my mother - also Amirisa - without being divided amongst daughters over successive generations' Mr Conaghan said.

'My great grandmother had five children and there are signs of alterations to accommodate her changing size'. Despite the alternations, the clothes are largely in pristine condition. The collection consists of summer and winter garments, coats, night wear - all the way down to bloomers.

The centrepieces of the collection are coat-dresses in the Ottoman style, worn open and to below the knee. Luscious emerald greens, purples, pinks and yellows, an Aladdin's kaleidoscope of colours, were worn together. Linings were as vivid as the outer fabrics as they were visible due to the coat-dresses being worn open.

'The Kastellorizians weren't afraid of colour and patterns back then' Mr Conaghan said of his great-grandmother's apparel that stands as the largest in-tact wardrobe that the Kastellorizian Association of Victoria knows to date.

The wardrobe carries a legacy and responsibility. 'It needs to be aired occasionally. I've spent over \$5,000 to have it professionally cleaned by a textile conservator who also advised on storage and I've purchased costumiers storage boxes similar to those used by museums.'

One of the airings will take place at the event being hosted at the KAV Club rooms on Sunday 14 April where his great grandmother's clothes will be presented along with other items donated by members to the Association by members.

There will be afternoon tea at 1.30pm followed by the presentation from 2.45 to 4.30pm. the KAV club rooms 250 Dorcas Street South Melbourne. Visitors should bring a plate.

